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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5382
INFO RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO PRIORITY 0452
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1774
RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT PRIORITY 6264
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 2593
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT PRIORITY 2215
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI PRIORITY
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS PRIORITY 7068
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA PRIORITY 3298
RUZEHAA/CDR USEUCOM INTEL VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000255

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT ASSAULTS EMBASSY IN THE PRESS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford; reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Recent media interest in the activities of the Ambassador and Embassy officials suddenly exploded onto the front pages March 3 when several major local newspapers featured critical remarks from Prime Minister Belkhadem and Foreign Minister Medelci. According to the papers, both Belkhadem and Medelci chastised the Embassy on March 2 for "interfering" in Algeria's internal affairs for meeting with political parties and members of civil society. We have received no official indication of displeasure from the government, however, despite several recent opportunities for them to have delivered it. The two ministers' remarks appear calculated primarily to divert public attention from sorer domestic subjects; we plan to seek official clarification. End Summary.

PM ASKS ALGERIAN POLITICAL PARTIES NOT TO TALK TO EMBASSIES

12. (U) The March 3 editions of both French- and Arabic-language newspapers carried extensive coverage of the statements attributed to Prime Minister Belkhadem and Foreign Minister Medelci outside parliament on March 2. "Algeria does not accept interference in its domestic issues from the U.S. embassy," commented PM Belkhadem during a press conference following the opening of the spring parliamentary session. "We ask our political parties not to go through embassies in order to express their concerns," he added. The statements were made in response to a journalist's question about U.S. Embassy meetings with political parties, NGOs and independent unions, which have been increasingly featured in the Algerian press (and where the proposed constitutional revision and a third term for President Bouteflika were allegedly discussed). Belkhadem also assigned blame to political parties and civil society for discussing internal issues with "entities representing foreign countries." The statements received wide coverage locally in the March 3 printed media. One newspaper, the popular Echourouk el-Youmi, reported that Belkhadem went so far as to say that political parties and NGOs should not work with (in Arabic, taammul) foreign embassies.

FM ALLEGEDLY REMINDS OF DIPLOMATIC ETIQUETTE

13. (U) "We have explained to the U.S. Ambassador that he needs to honor the rules and regulations of foreign diplomatic missions...these rules apply to everybody, without exception," the March 3 press reported Foreign Minister

Medelci as having said following the parliamentary opening session. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacted Mr. Ford to remind him that his activities within the framework of his mission in Algeria ought to respect the elementary rules of diplomacy," asserted the French-language daily L'Expression on March 3. Medelci is also described as having complained that the Ambassador did not seek permission from the ministry before his meetings with civil society representatives.

BUILDING TO A CRESCENDO

14. (C) Print media attention on the activities of the Ambassador and Embassy officers has increased steadily in the last two weeks, culminating in today's front-page articles. The press reports and comments from the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister referred to routine meetings the Embassy has had with political parties, labor unions, NGOs and members of civil society over recent months. These meetings have covered such issues as human rights, labor rights, religious freedom, Algerian and international political developments and potential avenues for cooperation. When the issue of the proposed revision of the Algerian constitution has been raised Embosffs have consistently stuck to one message: constitutional revisions and a potential third term for President Bouteflika are issues for the Algerians to decide, and we hope that whatever processes are used to address these issues are fair and transparent, and that the questions are subject to genuine, public debate. The Ambassador described the same position in his January 23 interview with Arabic-language daily El Bilad, which received front-page attention then.

OFFICIAL SILENCE

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15. (C) Despite all of the media hoopla, we have received no official communication from the MFA concerning Embassy activities. Belkhadem and Medelci had ample opportunity to raise any concerns during the February 26-27 visit of NEA A/S David Welch, but did not (septel). In his February 27 meeting with A/S Welch, FM Medelci stressed the Algerian government's desire to have a strong relationship with the United States and described the contact between the MFA and the Embassy as the most "important" of all the countries represented in Algeria. The Ambassador made an pre-arranged official visit to the Algerian Senate on March 3 morning and was warmly received.

16. (C) COMMENT: French Ambassador Bernard Bajolet told the Ambassador March 2 that he believed the media attacks on the Embassy were being used by Belkhadem to divert public attention away from domestic issues that are fueling public discontent. An editorial in the February 28 edition of L'Expression newspaper made the same point. We share that analysis; it appears Belkhedam may be nervous that we will speak publicly against the move towards constitutional amendments and a third term for Bouteflika. We also recall that Bouteflika himself scolded Algerian NGOs for visiting embassies during December 2006 remarks to the Algerian parliament. The Algerian government's remarks may also be reaction to a certain weakness on Belkhadem's part within his own divided political party. The remarks are nonetheless unhelpful and could easily scare some of our contacts from seeing us. We will approach the foreign ministry in the coming days to seek a clarification of the two ministers' intent. In the meantime, we are using routine press guidance about our normal activities in response to inquiries.

FORD